

2. Saints in the hands of a saving God

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Preacher: Dale Ralph Davis

[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our own teaching this morning and to the passage that Raph is going to be preaching from, and you'll find it in the book of Daniel. If you have one of our church Bibles, it's page 739.

If not, it's pretty near the end of the Old Testament, after Ezekiel and before Hosea. We're in Daniel chapter 3, a very well-known passage, but as they say on the airlines, even if you're a frequent flyer, do pay attention because there may just be things here you haven't quite noticed before. So, just because you've read this story once or twice or many times, let's give our attention and hear the word of God.

We'll read the whole of Daniel chapter 3. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold whose height was 60 cubits and its breadth 6 cubits.

He set it up on the plain of Jura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent together the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

[1 : 23] Then the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates and all the officials of all the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

And they stood before the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald proclaimed aloud, You are commanded, O peoples, nations and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Therefore, at that time, certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, O King, live forever.

You, O King, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and every kind of music shall fall down and worship the golden image.

[2 : 51] And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

These men, O King, pay no attention to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar, in furious rage, commanded that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be brought.

So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

Now, if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and every kind of music to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.

And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

[4 : 13] If this be so, our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

He ordered the fiery furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated and he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

And these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats and their other garments and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste.

[5 : 34] He declared to his counselors, did we not cast three men bound into the fire? They answered and said to the king, true, O king. He answered and said, but I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire and they're not hurt.

And the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods. Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace.

He declared, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the most high God, come out and come here. Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out from the fire.

The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men.

The air of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him and set aside the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own god.

[6 : 57] Therefore I make a decree. Any people, nation or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other God who is able to rescue in this way.

And the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon. Amen. May God bless to us this, his magnificent word.

Thank you, really.

The last time I was here, you were gathered here. So I feel at home being in this place. Our theme today is Saints in the Hands of the Saving God, and we're looking at Daniel chapter 3.

And you've probably noticed that governments and politicians are always dabbling in religion one way or another, and sometimes dangerously so. It was in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, in the heyday of Joe Stalin adulation, that Stalin's name was mentioned in a provincial meeting.

[8 : 28] And that triggered a standing ovation, which then triggered, of course, a standing dilemma, because who was going to sit down first?

You had to keep it up. But finally there was an elderly man there who couldn't hold on any longer, and at last he sat down, and they took down his name. And the next day he was arrested, because, well, he didn't worship the idol long enough.

Or it's the 20th of April, 1938, Buchenwald concentration camp. And all the prisoners are told that since this is Hitler's 49th birthday, at a given signal, they're to rip off their berets, and they're to venerate the swastika flag.

At the given signal, the headgear came off, except for one man. He was Pastor Paul Schneider. They took him in, and they gave him 25 lashes with an oxide whip.

Well, that was just the first oxide treatment he received, because, you see, he refused to worship the idol. And then you have, in our text, King Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, about 600 or so BC and so on, and he's dabbling in religion, and dangerously so.

[9 : 53] He puts up this humongous image of himself, not of himself, but rather probably representing his regime, and so on.

And it embodied his regime, probably. He required a kind of a mesh of religious, political loyalty. And even though it was a, in some ways, a political test of loyalty from the vast number of bureaucrats that served his kingdom, it also was mixed up in religion, because, as you notice, the implication of verses 12 and 14 and 18, it also involved the recognition or acknowledgement of

Babylon's gods.

Now, this is a part of the book of Daniel. And the book of Daniel is a manual for the suffering church. And the writer here holds before you this episode in chapter 3, because he wants you to make the same response as Daniel's friends.

Your response to Daniel 3 is to be this, I will believe and obey the first commandment even if it kills me, parenthesis, and it may.

[11:13] That's the response the writer wants from you. Now, as we look at this, I simply want to take it, take the text chunk by chunk and characterize it and develop it a little and then draw some implications from it.

So let's work our way through the account. So one, and the first thing I want you to notice, the first item, is the power of pressure, verses 1 to 15, the power of pressure. You notice in verses 1 and 2 that the image is set up on the plain of Dura.

I don't know where that was, maybe south of Babylon a ways. And it's 90 feet high and it's 9 feet wide. So it's a humongous image.

Some scholars think that included in that 90 feet of height, there must have been a substantial base or pedestal or something 90 feet high and 9 feet wide would get a little tipsy.

Whatever. We don't know for sure. But anyway, he sets this up and it's probably a civil service loyalty ceremony among other things.

[12:21] They're to pledge their fealty and their allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and to the regime and so on. And as with a lot of politics, then of course, you mix a little religion in with it as well.

Because it works on the assumption that everybody's a pluralist. Obviously, that's the way the ancient world thought. That's the way pagans thought. It didn't mean that you had to exclusively worship this image.

No, you just had to do it on this occasion for this reason of political and religious loyalty and so on. But you could go back and go back to your own gods or goddesses that you preferred to worship if you had a particularly favorite private religious superstition.

You could go back to that again. It didn't matter. There was a certain tolerance in the ancient Near East that way. Unless, of course, you worshipped only Yahweh or the Lord, the God of Israel.

And that's why these three friends of Daniel had a problem with an act of homage to Babin to Nebuchadnezzar's image. Now, I think it would be helpful here as we look at this to analyze the pressure for one thing.

[13:37] You have certain hints of it in verses 1 to 15. Now, what can we say about the pressure? Well, it comes from authority for one thing. You look at verses 1 to 7 and you notice in verses 1 to 7 that six times you have the words, well, in the ESV it's King Nebuchadnezzar.

A little more literally it's Nebuchadnezzar the king. Six times in those seven verses. This is coming from authority. There's all the weight of Nebuchadnezzar's kingship behind this.

The sheer weight of Nebuchadnezzar himself. But then it's not just authority, but it's a matter of conformity, isn't it? That's always a powerful thing. And after the proclamation goes out and so on about what's required, you notice that in verse 7, therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the hornpipe, our trogon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Obviously. That's what they had to do, or they thought they had to do it. The praise band plays, and you get your backside in the air, and your nose in the sand, and you enjoy job security.

That's what it takes. Well, it's better than the alternative, they obviously think. There's something powerfully compelling about watching that kind of conformity.

[15:17] Now, I know I shouldn't do this with an audience on this side of the pond, because if you came over to my side of the pond, and you talked to me about cricket, you would really have to explain stuff to me.

So when I come over here, and I may allude to baseball, I know you will be offended terribly, but you don't have to know anything about baseball. I'll tell you all you need to know. You know, in our game of baseball, if somebody is running the bases, and they're trying to get into a base, and so on, if it's a close call, the umpire, or the official, if he makes it, he says, safe, and that's the signal for safe, and that's good for the runner.

If he doesn't make it, then the opposing team gets him, as we say, out, then, in the old days, the umpire goes with the thumb up. That's out.

Now, there was a certain, got that, safe, out, that's all you need to know. Now, there was a time, back about the 1950s, when Brooklyn was playing Philadelphia, and they were playing in Brooklyn, and a runner from Philadelphia, a batter, hit the ball, and he was going to try to stretch the hit to go to what we call second base, and he slides into the dirt, and the Brooklyn player there tries to put a tag on him and so on, get him out, but the umpire, fellow by the name of Beans Reardon, obviously, if you're an umpire, you have a strange name, Beans Reardon said, safe.

Now, see, even you get that, and you don't, you've got it. Safe. And then, one of the Brooklyn players right there, said, Beans, do you know what you just did?

[17:06] He said, yeah, I know. And so, he began to explain, well now, what is the runner going to be? The runner from Philadelphia wanted to know. Well, he said, it's like this, there are three of us right here, who heard me call you safe, but there are 35,000 Brooklyn fans who saw me signal you out.

And so, the runner says, so what am I? He says, you're out. You don't go against 35,000 irate Brooklyn fans. There's a certain compulsion in that kind of pressure, isn't there?

And think what Daniel's friends felt in. There's that conformity of almost robotic worship in verse 7. That's tough stuff. Now, then there's another bit to add to this pressure, and it's not a direct addition to the pressure in a way, but it does add to it or brings a bit of a galling effect to it.

You notice in verses 8 to 12 that you have malice entering in and envy. There were some of these Chaldeans and so on who were, maybe they were in government, but further down the totem pole, as we say, from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but they were, had a little racial dig.

[18:30] You notice in verse 12, they come to Nebuchadnezzar and say, there are certain Jews. They kind of spit when they say that. That's kind of a racial, ethnic dig, whom you have appointed over the affairs of the providence of Babylon.

They're probably angry because these, Daniel's friends, these Jews, have upper crust positions in the echelons of government and they think that oughtn't to go to these captive, exiled Jews.

It ought to be native Babylonians that had that. In any case, there's this element of malice that's not going to allow Nebuchadnezzar to ignore what seems to be the defiance of these three fellows.

So they're not going to get off with this. It's going to be brought to his attention. And then, of course, there's the pressure from the sheer intimidation, verses 13 to 15, that comes from Nebuchadnezzar. He just is irate. He lights up with fury that these three men would actually defy his orders. And so he tells them, he asks them if it's true, and then he gives them, strangely enough, a second chance.

[19:46] Verse 15, you can do this, but I have three words for you. If you're not going to worship and bow down to my image and so on, there are three words that ought to move you tremendously.

Burning, fiery furnace. You got that? That's the way he approaches it. Something terribly intimidating about the rage of an ancient Near Eastern monarch and that kind of a threat.

Now that's the pressure. Now I think we need to notice though, there's a way of, can we say it, neutering the pressure? How do you relieve that?

How do you get out from under that? Is there any way to keep that pressure from getting to you?

And I think so. And the writer does it for us, I think, with, well, humor.

Let me get, first of all, at what may be not the most direct evidence of this.

[20:48] But, notice, I think it's almost a mocking manner in the narrative. I don't know as you noticed it as Dr.

Philip read the passage for the scripture reading. But you notice how it tends to, I'm not, I think this is the writer's intent, so I'm not criticizing the writer of Daniel all right, but it's almost as if he kind of goes overboard in his description.

Do you notice how he repeats all the officials and so on? As if he's trying to go into overkill mode to soup, I don't know if you have this expression, to soup up the description of the situation.

We'll just look at verse 2 there, you know, he goes through the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Verse 3, then the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, you know, he could have just said, then they all came, but he doesn't. He runs you through that whole list again.

[22:01] And then you have the listing of the musical instruments in Nebuchadnezzar's orchestra, don't you? It's one times there in verse 5 when you hear the sound of the hornpipe, lyotriion, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, etc., etc.

And then when he refers to it again, you notice it goes through them all in verse 10 and so on, and verse 15, and there's another place where it does, verse 7.

Why didn't he say when all the music started up? I mean, he said it once, but no, he takes you through every instrument in the orchestra all over again.

I think he's trying to build up an impression of mockery of this whole thing. It's as if he's saying, is this pomp or is this pomposity?

Is this dignity or should we say it's more derision? You may debate me with that and say, well, I don't know, Davis, I'm not quite convinced of that, but that seems to be something of it, but here's something you can't debate with me because I'm right.

[23 : 10] Notice the vicious verbs in the narrative. Notice verses 1 and 15 to start with, just a common verb, a kind of a colorless verb, the verb made.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, etc. And then he refers to that, that uses the same language in verse 15 when he talks about you must worship the image I have made.

Now, that shouldn't really strike you unless you're an Israelite who only worships the God of Israel and you know that you can't make deities.

then that's an oxymoron. But it's worse. There's another verb.

And if you have a fairly literal translation, it's a verb, usually translated here, set up. And you have it nine times in the text. If you don't believe me, it's in verses 1, 2, twice, and verse 3, 5, 7, 12, 14, and 18.

[24 : 23] Set up, set up, set up. What is it? The image that Nebuchadnezzar set up. Set up, set up. We'll go through the text and take your orange highlighter, or yellow if you have to use that, and highlight every one of those instances of that verb.

And then go back and read it. And see if the writer doesn't seem to be impressing you as kind of suggesting a cumulative mockery of the whole thing.

I don't know if you have the expression here or not. We sometimes talk about, oh, that's a set-up job. Well, this is a set-up job. There's something Nebuchadnezzar set-up, set-up, and he's mocking it.

In other words, he's trying to show you how empty it is. He's saying, this thing is as divine as your knee replacement.

It doesn't count for anything. And as he mocks this, if you see what he's doing, he's trying to help you to resist the pressure that's coming down, as if he says, if you just see behind this thing, if you see what's really the case, if you see that there's no truth in this, you don't have to worry about the pressure.

[25 : 53] It was in mid-1938 when Adolf Hitler paid a visit to Italy and wanted to cement an alliance with Mussolini.

And Mussolini entertained him royally and subjected him to a number of demonstrations of apparent Italian military might and so on. But the people of Italy seem to have a kind of a sullen apathy toward Hitler and toward the German leader.

In fact, when he spent about four hours in Florence, he must have been dismayed when it became clear that the cheers that were rending the air were fictitious.

They were coming from the crowd effects of an Italian movie and they were being played from the open windows from amplifiers sitting in open windows.

It was a sign that something was wrong. There can be great power and real emptiness side by side.

[27 : 03] And the writer of Daniel 3 wants you to see, look at the power of pressure, but understand that there's a real emptiness there. As one writer calls it, he calls it holy laughter.

Holy laughter helps you to endure if you can see the real weakness behind the facade of power, the power of pressure.

Now secondly, let's notice the obstinacy of obedience, verses 16 to 18. The obstinacy obstinacy of obedience. And as we look at that, notice that Daniel's friends had all kinds of reasons for submitting to Nebuchadnezzar's offer of worshiping that image, of making sure they maintained their positions.

Think what they could have thought if they were pondering their options. They might have thought that they really ought to seriously consider submitting to this because if they lost their jobs, who would look out for the exiles of Israel?

Look what you've got here. You've got three Israelites who are in top positions in Nebuchadnezzar's government, and when that happens, they can kind of serve as buffers.

[28 : 31] They can kind of look out for the interests of the Israelite captives. If they're gone, what will happen to Israel? So you see, they could make that argument.

Or they could also make the argument, look, we defied Nebuchadnezzar once, and he is irate. He is simply lit up over this, but, you know, strangely enough, he's giving us another opportunity.

He could have just had us executed on the spot. Now he's off, he's going to crank up the orchestra again, and we have another opportunity. We shouldn't spit in his eye, should we, if he's given us another opportunity?

They might have thought that, or they might have done, as politicians at least on our side of the pond tend to do, make an argument between the official and the personal category.

Well, personally, this action of bowing to the image does not reflect my personal religious preference, and so on, but because this happens to be my job, and I have to exercise my life in the public sector, and so on, for the sake of the party, or for the sake of my colleagues, etc., I feel compelled, it's an occupational hazard, and I think I need to do that, but personally, my own personal, private faith really doesn't consent to this.

[30 : 03] You know, you kind of try to ride the middle. They could have done that, but they didn't do it. Now, notice the answer they give there.

They say to Nebuchadnezzar in verses 16 to 18, Nebuchadnezzar, you just as well save your orchestrophy. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

And then I think verse 17 should be translated a little bit differently than the way it commonly is, and if you have the New International Version, it's especially interpretive there.

But verse 17, a better translation I think is, if our God exists, whom we are serving, he is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and from your hand, O king, he can deliver.

Doesn't mean that they doubted that their God exists, it's just the way they're couching it, the better rendering of 17 from the Aramaic. If our God exists, whom we're serving, he is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace.

[31 : 18] And then of course in verse 18 they say, but if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up. Now you notice that their answer speaks of both the ability and the pleasure of God.

If our God exists, he is able to deliver us. So they're speaking of God's ability to deliver them. and then they mention the pleasure of God though.

Verse 18, but if not. They're saying, we don't know. We don't know whether God will. He may, he may not.

But it could be in the Gennesar that you'll make three puddles of carbon out of us. We have no idea what God's pleasure may be. And then they say, nevertheless, last of verse 18, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up.

Why not? Well, because they're resting on God's revealed will. The last of verse 18, they're simply saying, we do know God's revealed will.

[32 : 33] Exodus 20 verse 3, you shall have no other gods besides me. And we're sticking to it. That's God's revealed will.

But his circumstantial will, what he might do in various situations, we don't have a ghost of an idea of Nebuchadnezzar, but if not, he may not deliver us, he may let us fry in the burning fiery furnace, and we don't like that, but we don't know what he'll do.

But here's the bottom line. We don't know his circumstantial will, but we have his revealed will, and that's all that matters, and we're standing there. That's the obstinacy of obedience.

It's a good obstinacy. Now, you notice how balanced their faith is. Let's work through 17 and 18 again.

This shows us that faith knows the power of God, verse 17, and God is able to deliver us. faith knows the power of God.

[33 : 41] Faith guards the freedom of God, verse 18. But if not, we don't give our God directions. He is not our errand boy.

If not, he may not deliver us. So, they're guarding the faith, guards the freedom of God to do as he pleases. And then faith holds the truth of God, the last of verse 18.

We will not serve your gods or worship the golden image. We stand on Exodus 20, verse 3. Guards holds to the truth of God. Notice what balanced that is.

There are some Christians or professing Christians anyway in our day. I don't know about Britain and so on, but in my country, there are some Christians who would be upset with these three men. When they say in verse 18, but if not, they would say to them, no, no, no, no, no, you don't consider that possibility. Don't say that. You're beaming negative thoughts into your faith.

[34 : 46] You don't want to do that. No, no, you need to claim that our God is going to deliver us and we're going to make something like what we call a positive confession that together we're going to claim what God is going to do and we're going to bind the fire, Nebuchadnezzar, or whatever that means and so on.

But there are some Christians who just can't stand any kind of uncertainty.

but that kind of a position borders on arrogance rather than faith. Faith doesn't plot God's course. It just obeys God's word. It doesn't predict God's ways. It just holds to God's command. And you see that here.

Now, we also have to look at one other thing in this obstinacy of obedience and that is to be clear about the real issue. Sometimes we can confuse the real issue.

[35 : 54] You notice the real issue here is not security. They're not concerned about how they preserve their own skins and so on. That's not the major thing.

Sometimes, you know, other things being equal, it's pretty important to preserve your life. But you dare not make your own security an idol.

And they didn't. The issue was worship, not security. Now, if you go back over your text, if you have a fairly literal translation, you might notice that the word worship is used 11 times in the text throughout the narrative, beginning at verse 5, 6, 7, and so on.

You just have to take my word for it, but it's used 11 times. And there's another verb, serve, that's used five times. Now, that verb serve, when it's used this way, is a word that means serve, in a sense of serving a deity.

That's very close to worshiping. Now, if you take those two verbs, you have a total of 16 times this terminology is used. That's the issue here. Worship, not security.

[37 : 08] In other words, we have to be clear about what we don't need, and we don't necessarily need to be preserved at all costs, the text seems to be saying.

Jeffrey Thomas, in his exposition of Daniel, touched on it this way. He said, we don't have to be rich, we don't have to marry, we don't have to become parents, we don't have to live, but we have to obey.

There was a fellow who was in a theological class with the French Reformed scholar, Jean Cadier, a number of years ago, and he came up to his professor after the class one day and said that he had been converted from reading Calvin's Institutes.

And Cadier asked him what was the message precisely that came across that initiated this change. And the student said, well, I discovered from reading Calvin that all my worries about health and about the uncertain future that had previously dominated my life were without much importance, and that the only thing that mattered was obedience to the will of God and a care for his glory.

Sounds maybe kind of trite to you, but isn't it liberating? The obstinacy of obedience. Maintain it.

[38 : 54] Now, thirdly, notice the flames of fellowship in verses 19 to 30. The flames of fellowship. Here, we're in this last segment of the chapter, of course, and we can divide it up several ways if we're just working through the content.

You have in verses 19 to 23 what you might call the committal, the committal rather to the burning furnace and so on. And then you notice in verses 24 and 25 you have the surprise, we'll come back to that, where Nebuchadnezzar is utterly flabbergasted by what he sees.

And then in verses 26 to 27 we have the evidence. It's after the men come out from the furnace that the Nebuchadnezzar and his various lackeys gather around and they actually examine these fellows.

This is important and crucial. There has to be examination and evidence. They have to see that there was absolutely no harm that was done to them.

And then of course you have the confession of faith, not the confession of faith perhaps, but at least the confession of truth in verses 28 and 29 where finally Nebuchadnezzar says there is no other God who is able to rescue in this way.

[40 : 14] Now let's go back and look at especially at verse 25. So the worst had happened. They had been tossed into the burning fiery furnace.

That's interesting, that phrase burning fiery furnace is used eight times in the chapter. That seems to be what is, well it's not the ultimate, but it seems to be the ultimate danger for at least some. But that actually happened. There they went. But then there's something that Nebuchadnezzar had to check his contact lenses in verse 25 because he said, he asked his people, didn't we cast three men in?

They said, yes, you always agree with the king. And he said, but I see four men unbound walking in the midst of the fire and they're not hurt and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods. Now he did his math. We put three in but there are four in there. We had bound them but they're unbound. They're freely walking around. They are more over unharmed and that fourth one is as the appearance of a son of the gods.

[41 : 27] That means he is an angelic or a supernatural being. Now for the precise identity of that fourth person, we can't trust a pagan like Nebuchadnezzar, but he knew that this was some unusual visitant and so on.

Perhaps we could call him the fourth man. Do you think perhaps that this might be an appearance and a manifestation of the son of God himself before he became in the flesh?

I think this could well be. I tend to think so. Although I'm not sure I could prove it just from this text. But is this an appearance of what we may call the pre-incarnate Christ?

I tend to think so, yes. interesting, isn't it, that Christ did not keep them out of the furnace, but found them in it.

Very typical in a way, because that he would share, you might say, their trouble and place himself there. That's very like our God.

[42 : 42] Isaiah 63 verse 9, referring back to the time when Israel was in Egypt. In all their affliction, he was afflicted. He somehow is not immune, he is not allergic to coming and sharing in his people's difficulties, etc., and in their troubles.

And isn't that, though Christ does not keep us perhaps from the fire, he enters into the trouble with us and he finds us there.

fear. So, just as here, it's in the loneliness and it's in the darkness and it's in the betrayal and it's in the loss that Christ, the fourth man, comes and walks with you.

The fourth man can always find his people and he doesn't always exempt us from what Isaiah 43 calls the waters and the rivers and the fire, but he comes, the fourth man comes walking with us in those troubles.

He walks with you into the operating room and into the funeral parlor. And after that, even in the empty house that seems to be left to you.

[44 : 18] Now, so that we find there may be flames, but there is the companionship of Christ, they are flames of fellowship.

As the apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 4 verse 17, all others deserted me at my first trial, but the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.

The fourth man can find you in your trouble. Now, this furnace story tells of deliverance, but it's about worship, and Daniel 3 means to tell me that the only matter that matters is that I keep the first commandment even if it kills me.

And now that we live in post-empty tomb time, there is an added reason to remain faithful. Os Guinness tells of one of the periodic efforts to wipe out religious belief in the former Soviet Union. He tells of that time when the Communist Party sent KGB agents throughout the country to a number of the churches. And in one of them, one agent was struck by an elderly woman who was her deep devotion as he saw her kissing the feet of a life-sized carving of Christ on the cross.

[45 : 50] And so he asked her, Babushka, grandmother, are you also willing to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist Party?

And she shot back, of course, as long as you crucify him first. So we can meet those three words, burning, fiery furnace, with three more, old, rugged, cross.

If the fourth man went that far for you, you dare not turn away from him.

Let us pray. Amen. Now, our God, most of us, as we go our ways this week, are not going to meet a burning, fiery furnace.

But we will meet an accounting office, or school desks, or kitchen sinks, or car shops, or medical clinics, or sick beds.

[47 : 21] and we pray that wherever we are placed, we will be faithful to you, our only God, and to Jesus Christ, our only Lord.

Amen.